

THIRD DISTRICT STORM RESPONSE COMMITTEE REPORT

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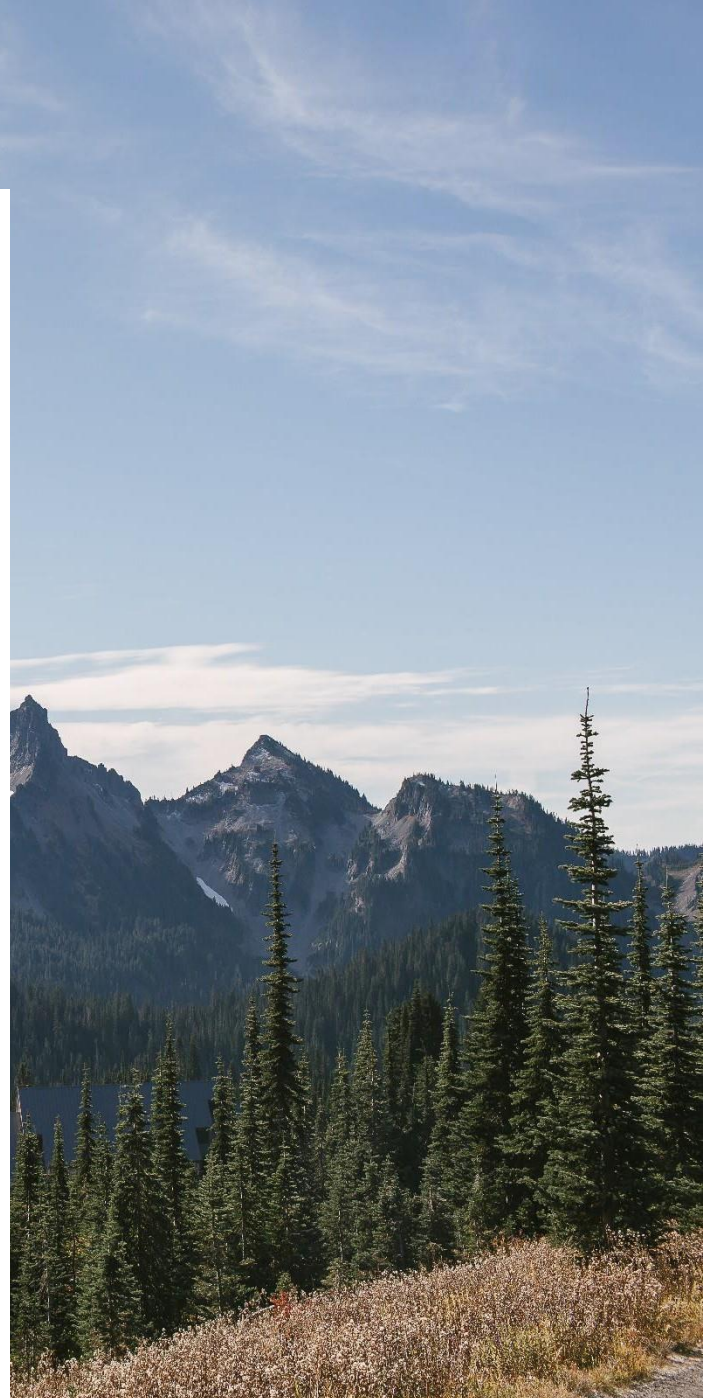
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Introduction

In the aftermath of the 2023 Winter Storm Event(s) that devastated the San Bernardino Mountains, an independent committee was created by Third District Supervisor Dawn Rowe, to collect honest feedback on the County's storm response. This feedback was collected through the committee members who are leaders within their communities spanning from Crestline, Lake Arrowhead, Angelus Oaks, Forest Falls, and Big Bear. They have each provided unfiltered and constructive feedback on the government's response so the issues faced during the 2023 Winter Storm can be addressed moving forward.

Residents of mountain communities impacted by the snowstorms of February and March of 2023 provided the unedited comments and feedback contained in this report. These remarks reflect the opinions of the people interviewed for this report and may not be an accurate representation of actual events. These comments do not represent the opinions of Supervisor Dawn Rowe or any official San Bernardino County agency. The content of this report has been provided to Supervisor Rowe for her review and is also being made available to outside agencies and the general public. While the opinions expressed in this report may not accurately depict what happened during the snowstorm response, they may illustrate how mountain residents perceived the response.

Feedback from members were on the following six categories—

1. Road Maintenance and Snow Removal
2. Restoration of Public Utilities
3. Public Safety and Emergency Services
4. Operations of Area Schools
5. Access To Food, Medicine, and Emergency Medical Services for Vulnerable Populations
6. County Communications with Impacted Residents, Businesses, and the General Public

Within each area the committee provided feedback on things that went wrong, things that went well, and missed opportunities for the future. Feedback was received on both County and interagency efforts. This report will be shared with County leadership and any other respective entities discussed throughout the report.

It is the committee's hope that this will provide a great framework for all government entities to use when planning for future disasters that may impact the community.

Road Maintenance and Snow Removal

Negatives—

County's Response

Early on into the storm, the snow was allowed to accumulate too much which shifted the snow removal response into a reactive versus proactive approach. Snowplows could have passed more frequently early on to avoid the accumulation of snow. The level of snow that accumulated made normal plows and heavy equipment insufficient in some areas. Most of the plows only pushed the snow and the snow had to be lifted at that point which was difficult. It was difficult for plow operators to see roadways and driveways, which resulted in the creation of large berms on private property.

In some areas County operators started plowing for about 48-72 hours after the storm began and then they stopped so resources could be diverted to help Southern California Edison (SCE) access downed power lines. SCE needs to have their own equipment for future winter storms to avoid pulling from County resources.

The County should have found a way to get more equipment staged and ready to deploy in advance so that there was no delay in getting additional equipment up the mountain. County Public Works should also procure more snowblowers across the mountain communities.

Due to the volume of snow and limited County equipment, extra plows and operators were brought in from across the State to assist with plowing efforts. As a result, there were many inexperienced plow drivers who did not know the mountain communities or how to plow snow especially at this level. There is now road damage due to the extra plows and operators that were brought in. Restoration work on roads is now needed in the aftermath of the storm. Under normal winter storm conditions, residents can typically expect to be plowed out overnight and they had an understanding of the order in which roads are plowed (i.e., Double yellow

lines indicate a priority road which is plowed first). In most cases it took days for residents to have their roads made passable let alone cleared. In addition, the heavy equipment operators from outside the area were unfamiliar with the protocol that locals were accustomed to, which caused further frustrations. Residents had no indication of when their road would be plowed. Additionally, inexperienced operators could not determine which homes were occupied by signs such as a shoveled driveway. Residents who had spent hours clearing their driveways to gain access once the road was plowed ended up being obstructed by large berms on their property. Non-County plow drivers need to be strictly directed by the incident management team (IMT).

Due to the confusion over when roads would be plowed, the County launched the Snow Removal Map. It was well intended but did create some issues. Some residents thought it was exciting because they were expecting information on the precise areas the plows were working on. The map was only updated once a day instead of providing live information. It also only focused on what had been completed and did not show any indication of the areas that were scheduled for plowing. Residents wanted to know when they would be helped, but it only told them they were left out. The map was also inaccurate at times. It would show a specific road as completed, however those on that road knew it was not. The map was more helpful for those down the mountain than for those stuck at home in some cases.

For those residents on a non-maintained road, it was extremely confusing to figure out what resources were available to them. It was not necessarily clear what that means for them as individuals on a non-county road and what to expect from it.

Caltrans and California Highway Patrol

In the past Caltrans has pulled equipment from the mountains to clear the Cajon Pass, but they did not have to return to this accumulation of snow. During this storm event Caltrans equipment was diverted and this resulted in yet another reactive versus proactive approach to snow plowing. It also forced the isolation of the mountain communities since the highways were inoperable.

After the highways were cleared, Caltrans tried to reopen the highways too soon. There was little communication between Caltrans and the County. Once the highways were reopened it allowed some residents to travel down the mountain to go purchase vital goods such as food and medications for their families or neighbors who were still stuck. Residents would go down and were unable to return home. They would sit at the base of the mountain for hours with no clear information on when they could return home. Services like Google maps did not show that it was open to residents only, so the residents really relied on Facebook to communicate with others who were able to get back up the mountain. People want more information and reasonings behind closures or blockages.

The relationship needs to be fixed with Caltrans and California Highway Patrol (CHP) there is no public input they do not proactively reach out to the public. There were also evident lag times in their communications. For example, Caltrans would announce the reopening of highways to residents, however CHP did not let residents back up the mountains for hours. There was also no clear explanation provided to residents from either Caltrans or CHP as to why residents could not go back home.

Caltrans cannot close highways without CHP approval and there was a delay in CHP approving the closures despite the clear need based on road and snow conditions. Once travel was being re-authorized CHP restricted traffic going up. CHP needed a better system to control people going up with food and medicine.

Everything that went wrong with Caltrans District 8 during this storm has been addressed in previous years. They have an overall lack of response for winter storms. Northern California Caltrans districts like Yosemite Valley handles winter storms more seamlessly and effectively.

Caltrans District 8 has no protocol in place on how to prepare in advance for pending major storm events. They do not stage equipment nor do they have a pre-approved list of private grading contractors that they can hire if they need help. As a result of the 2019 "Thanksgiving Day Storm" a local Chamber of Commerce sent a letter to the Governor and Caltrans District 8 requesting that protocols used in Northern California be implemented in preparation of major storm events. Caltrans did not act on the request.

Positives—

After a few days snow removal response eventually shifted to a more organized plan where residents could begin to visibly see results. The County's Snow Removal website was beneficial in this regard.

Following the plowing of County maintained roads, the County began to help those on private access roads which is not normally a service offered in typical storm events.

It was helpful that the County was able to bring in extra plows, equipment, and operators despite the other set of issues it brought.

In Angelus Oaks, the County plowed quickly once they had access. Caltrans had to clear the Highways before the County could come in.

The County is doing a good job with fixing potholes and repairing roadways that were damaged during the storm.

Missed Opportunities for the Future—

The County should have a bigger force of equipment and operators staged in preparation for a storm event of this size, especially when advanced warning is given. If the storm ends up being less severe than the forecast predicted, it is better to send resources away opposed to needing them and not having them readily available.

Most if not all County equipment has a GPS tracker that should be utilized to provide residents with live updates of road plowing in real time during every winter, not just in severe storms.

The County should create a video or mailer about frequently asked questions for residents on non-maintained roads to educate them in advance of each winter.

The County should focus more on first pass access on roads. Instead of making a single road passable and then widening the road, they should focus on making all roads passable and then pivot into widening efforts.

A separate State initiated audit needs to be done of Caltrans District 8 and the local CHP office to address their lack of response for the constituents they serve.

Restoration of Public Utilities

Negatives—

Southern California Gas (SoCalGas) needed better communication regarding buried gas meters. Residents were very scared that their houses would explode and initially there were conflicting messages about this from SoCalGas and the San Bernardino County Fire Protection District (SBCFPD).

Equipment owned by utility companies could not get into areas with downed powerlines because the roads needed to be cleared. This caused a delayed response in some areas that were without power.

Verizon had previously installed communications towers to help with emergency communications, but some people still couldn't get through to Emergency Medical Services during this storm. After two weeks some areas were still without phone service. There was no communication through landline and cell phone or internet in impacted areas.

Burrtec did not provide waste collection services for three weeks. When Burrtec decided to offer credits to some residents, there was no consistency in receiving the service credits. Many customers were faced with horrible customer service when seeking credits.

There was an insufficient supply of diesel fuel on the mountain to support the amount of equipment being used.

Positives—

The County's efforts in assisting SCE were great even though it did cause delays in some areas. SCE had been doing a lot of work up on the mountains for the past few years and those efforts really paid off during this storm. Most areas that normally experience power outages during storms did not experience any. The areas that did have power outages experienced them due to storm related causes like fallen trees.

The Cedar Glen community has pre-existing water system issues but during this storm event there were no water shutoffs.

CalFire came out and helped impacted residents dig out gas meters.

Missed Opportunities for the Future—

Roll away trash bins from Burrtec should be brought in before the storm so communities can utilize them until trash trucks have road access.

SoCalGas missed an opportunity to clarify what the issue was when the first house caught fire due to suspected gas meter damage. This inundated the 911 system because residents were scared and thought their house would immediately blow up because of the meters being buried.

County Public Works should have diesel storage facilities for future emergencies.

Public Safety and Emergency Services

Negatives—

The County's Office of Emergency Services (OES) dropped the ball. There was a significant amount of confusion about who was in charge. The response from County OES was not as organized as it has been for past events such as wildfires or earthquakes. Typically, OES sets up a command center and controls all information about disaster events.

County OES was also delayed in accepting donations of goods such as food and water. Donations that were offered very early on into the storm were turned away due to disorganization.

There was an incident where a preschool wanted to serve as an evacuation shelter to help with storm response efforts. There had been photos of CalFire crews working in that specific area, so the preschool reached out to CalFire for guidance. CalFire said they needed to call the IMT because OES tells them where to go. CalFire gave her County PIO information, and they reached out and never heard back.

Mountain Area Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) was not activated through County OES. They are trained and equipped to help communities during

natural disasters. CERT cannot be activated without OES saying so and because that call was not made, they were unable to provide vital assistance to communities.

The County's Emergency Call Center (909-387-3911) has great intentions but created a lot of confusion for residents. In some instances, residents were not getting through and did not get responses. Fire departments were telling people not to call the hotline and to just call 911. The 911 system was inundated as a result. In some instances, it took one day for residents to get a response to 911 calls.

The Red Cross evacuation centers were inconveniently located for some areas like Running Springs. So, the Running Springs Fire Department opened an evacuation site at Hoffman Elementary School. Running Springs was totally ignored, and they received little county help. The County should have communicated with the Running Springs Fire Department to see what resources they needed and make sure they were okay. The Red Cross has only one person who coordinates services throughout the County. This created massive barriers in getting resources to communities such as a Red Cross trailer full of evacuation center supplies that was unable to be moved from a fire station to an evacuation site.

The CHP station on the mountain does not have a Captain. Residents felt that having a Lieutenant who was not from the community made it difficult for CHP to understand the needs of the community in this storm event.

Positives—

Given the circumstances, EMS did the best they could. Because of road conditions, first responders had accessibility issues to both residents and their respective stations. They were able to make the best of the resources available to them to provide the best possible service to the communities. There was also a large presence of first responders on the mountain.

Missed Opportunities for the Future—

The County should put out more messaging on natural disaster preparedness and prevention, but especially in advance of the blizzard warning that was issued to the mountain communities.

There were still areas where people could not get through to EMS. How can that be mitigated for future natural disasters?

The County's Building and Safety Division of Land Use Services should have played a more active role in terms of preventing structural failure caused by snow accumulation on commercial buildings. A local City has an administrative policy manual for staff that outlines their specific roles and responsibilities during snowstorms. Building and Safety officers are responsible for contacting commercial property owners in advance of heavy snow fall to warn them about potential roof damage if snow levels are significant. This should have been done so properties like the two grocery stores could have been helped before their roofs collapsed.

Operation of Area Schools

Negatives—

There is a state regulation that prohibits more than 10% of students in an entire district from participating in distance learning. Even if the district was able to distribute supplies for students to participate in distance learning throughout the storm, they would not have been able to do that.

There were issues with IMT and Red Cross and how each entity said an evacuation site could be opened. There were a few schools that were willing to serve as an evacuation site and the Red Cross told them no while IMT said yes. The Red Cross has so much protocol that it's like working with the federal government. It really hindered the ability to get resources.

The school district was trying to reopen schools around March 17-19 but ran into issues with the school bus inspections. School buses are supposed to be inspected every 30 days by CHP and it had been 27 days since they were covered with snow. The district had asked CHP for an exemption given the circumstances and CHP denied it. As a result of trying to clear all the buses and have them reinspected, the reopening of schools was delayed even more.

There was a lot of miscommunications over the Red Cross being up there. It was unclear which sites were and were not a shelter. A local high school was supposed to

be an evacuation center, but they didn't have a working generator and were therefore barred from opening an evacuation center.

Positives—

Using the schools as distribution sites was great but the road issues prevented everyone from benefiting from the resources.

The school district got help to re-open schools and plow bus stops after 3-3 ½ weeks.

The County was helpful in expediting the bus inspection process so schools could reopen. The County also did a great job helping clear bus routes and bus stops.

Every school site had been used in some capacity to help with efforts.

Thousand Pines Camp was a great example of how to keep roadways cleared throughout the snowstorm.

Missed Opportunities for the Future—

The Superintendent did a great job communicating with board members and parents.

Schools are required to have a working generator to be an evacuation site. There should be some type of grant program or County assistance for school districts to procure generators for emergencies. The School Board is addressing this so that the high school can be prepared to serve as an evacuation center in the event of an emergency.

The County needs to make sure that potential evacuation sites are maintained and are keeping up with requirements so that if there is another emergency they are prepared.

We could have reverted to virtual school, like during COVID had it not been for the state regulation capping distance learning. Legislation should be proposed to allow for districts to pivot to distance learning when they can during declared emergencies.

Access To Food, Medicine and Emergency Medical Services for Vulnerable Populations

Negatives—

Residents needed to be more prepared at home and they became reliant on resources being made available to them.

Due to road conditions and the closure of state highways, residents were unable to access all resources that were being made available such as the Community Points of Distribution (CPOD) sites. If the roads are clear, there is no problem with getting resources.

There was no plan to receive and deliver supplies to residents, especially those who could not physically get out of their homes. There was too much reliance on people to get out of their homes to make it to CPODs.

Some residents were not aware that OES was helping with medication delivery through the Emergency Call Center. Residents did not know who to go to and had to figure it out themselves.

The County's free firewood program was mismanaged. The County advertised free firewood at the high school and elementary school, but there were no times listed and the schools did not actually have wood available right away. There was great intent behind the advertisement, but there was not enough information for it to have been super helpful to the public. The County advertisements should have provided more specifics like the time and the quantity (i.e., until supplies run out). The people in charge had no idea what they were doing in terms of passing out firewood.

County employees at a CPOD were initially limiting the amount of food people could take. So, someone who walked miles to the site in the rough conditions and wanted to take food back to elderly neighbors was denied by County personnel. They were told there was only one box per person, which was frustrating for those trying to

help their families and neighbors. There was so much conflict between County personnel and the residents in need that the Sheriff's department had to come in to resolve disputes.

Positives—

SBCFPD and local fire departments did a great job with what they could.

For those who lived on a non-maintained road, first responders were still able to help them in life threatening situations.

Good to see the teamwork from other cities and areas that came to help the County. There was a large SBCFPD vehicle presence which made residents feel secure.

Despite road accessibility issues, those who needed help were able to receive help.

Missed Opportunities for the Future—

There was a higher need for emergency shelters. There was only one official Red Cross evacuation center on the mountain, and it was too far for most residents. Even if the residents wanted to drive to the site, they could not because of road conditions and closures. The County and collaborating entities should prioritize clearing the roads to emergency shelters, CPODS, and other resources. Parking lots for these sites should also be cleared for increased accessibility. CPODs need to be more spread out throughout the mountain so all communities have access.

CERT and National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) should be activated for future disasters. There also needs to be a plan in place where designated people who are trained properly to provide these services can help the community.

California OES used to issue cards for people who are certified for disaster response so they could be exempt from road closures and can deliver vital goods to residents and communities. This needs to be discussed with state officials so these goods can be brought in when they are needed most.

The County shouldn't be the one to organize volunteers. This should be left up to the communities. Each pocket of mountain communities has their groups of volunteers

and people who get information and supplies out that know the area and know the residents. OES should issue a handbook or guide for non-profits and community groups who are ready to jump into action during emergencies so that they are aware of what they need to do to help with County efforts quickly and effectively.

Angelus Oaks was prepared to feed 400 people for 72 hours because of their non-profit GreyBack. Communities should form similar programs and non-profits to increase individual preparedness.

County Communications with Impacted Residents, Businesses & the General Public

Negatives—

There was no centralized and reliable source of information for residents. They relied heavily on word of mouth and had to search various websites and social media groups to find information on County efforts. It took people a while to realize how much the county was really doing versus the misinformation about the county. There needs to be coordinated communication to prevent this.

The County should have used more precise language in communications to the public to clearly set expectations.

Reverse 911 system was only used after confusing messages from SBCFPD and SoCalGas about the gas meters had gone out. Should've been used sooner and more frequently especially since some areas did not have power, internet, or cellular service.

Supervisor Rowe held an online community town hall on March 2nd which was great, but people did not know who Graham Smith was and why he was given the opportunity to speak on behalf of the community. While the town hall was a good effort, it seemed very scripted.

State Senator Bogh, State Assemblyman Lackey, and Director of Caltrans District 8 were completely absent in reaching out to constituents.

Positives—

The County Board of Supervisors were quick in declaring a local emergency, allocating additional resources to the storm, and calling for State and Federal emergency proclamations.

Supervisor Rowe was a point of contact for some communities and was the only outreach they received from the County.

Supervisor Rowe’s office was very quick and responsive.

Missed Opportunities for the Future—

The County posted pictures of major buildings like the post office or grocery store being cleared off and the County should have explained how they were vital resources for the community. Many residents saw these photos and felt the County did not care about the little people.

The County should come up with a winter campaign to educate residents on how they can prepare for large storm events.

There needs to be an EMS communications system in place like reverse 911 where residents can receive updates and communication in areas that are down.

During the Old Fire a designated Public Information Officer assigned to the response team would broadcast updates twice a day on radio channels. That provided residents with a consistent and reliable source for updates on disaster response efforts. During this winter storm residents had to rely on social media outlets to receive such information. The Facebook posts put out by the County were helpful but too general to answer specific concerns of residents.